THE MEANING OF HISTORY

Principal Miller Endowment Lectures

by

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Lecture I

Clues and Stumbling-blocks

Introduction

I feel very honoured indeed by the invitation extended to me by the University of Madras to deliver the Principal Miller Endowment Lectures this year. Principal Miller was a distinguished educationist of a bygone age whose contribution to the cause of education in Madras we do well to remember. Each generation needs to explore for itself the theme which is expressed in these words: "The inner meaning of history as disclosing the one increasing purpose that runs through the ages." The choice of words is, I think, significant. The manifest meaning of a historical event may not be far to seek. The transfer of power, for example, from Britain to free and independent India, is something which is described in detail by modern historians. The inner meaning is perhaps yet to be grasped in terms of the growing control of the peoples of India over their own destiny. The invention of the printing press carries the latent meaning of a major step forward in man's self-articulation, his reaching out to communicate with others. To "disclose" suggests a movement from the 'adṛsta' to the 'dṛsta', the uncovering of what was closed or shut. The choice of the adjective "increasing" too, I find significant. Our perception of pattern, whether in our own lives, or that of human societies, is a gradual process. The disclosure is not once for all. How could it be so, considering that man lives in time. I find myself therefore in substantial sympathy with the theme set for these lectures.

There are those, however, who would deny that talk of "The meaning of history" itself had any meaning. I would like to make brief reference to them first. The people who regard talk about "reality as a whole" as presumptuous are the same people who disallow talk about "history as a whole". The analytical philosopher eschews the task of trying to elucidate the human past itself and seeks to elucidate the ways in which historians typically describe that past. For them, in other words, philosophy of history is a piecemeal enquiry of a second-order kind. They cover matters like the presuppositions underlying historical narration, categories implicit in historical judgment and explanation. and the sorts of argument used to back up historical conclusions. I have no doubt that such investigations have a clarificatory role although I am not altogether sure that they should be pursued by philosophers rather than by historians themselves in the course of their own researches. The analytical treatment of philosophy of history, in common with the analytical approach in other branches of philosophy, is inspired by a desire to avoid metaphysics. The trouble is that it is almost impossible to avoid metaphysics if one is philosophising about history. The reason is this. In thinking about historical events we "go beyond" the data I believe in far more radical a manner than we do in investigating nature, for we are trying to understand the nature of events that are past in time. This enterprise inevitably takes us beyond the verdict of the senses and the kind of understanding we set to work in logic and mathematics. 'Speculation' is the word used by the detractors of the kind of thinking which takes us beyond the data to arrive at conclusions which cannot be verified by experience. But what the speculative philosophers of history were trying to do was to interpret empirical history in such a way that history would not appear as a sheerly contingent concatenation of events. Idealists have always se great store by the belief that knowledge is dependent on an essential kinship between mind and its object. Now there does seem to be a sense in which history is akin to man in the sense that man is himself a historical being. This in a twofold sense: he is in history and he has himself his own personal history. Let us first examine these two facets of a man's historicity before going further.

We are actors in the drama of history, we are caught up in the events which historians record whether this be the great depression of

the thirties or the partition of India, depending on the place and time in which we find ourselves. We are not unaffected by history. Many people, in this century indeed millions—are the victims of historic events. Secondly each man has his own personal history. Our basic awareness of the vicissitudes of life is drawn from our own experience. We ask ourselves "what does it all mean? We wonder whence we have come, whether there is a destiny that shapes our ends, and what we can hope for. Kant was surely right in insisting that man has a natural disposition to raise questions like this. With increasing age a man draws on memory in his constant assessment of his own life, in his search for a pattern. Some philosophers have expressed the view that it is man's very historicity that disqualifies him from discerning a meaning in history, on the ground that this, ipso facto, makes it impossible for man to attain a vantage point from which it would be possible for him to think in terms of history as a whole. I am arguing, however, that we have an analogy for the understanding of historical process in our own sense of identity over a life-time of experience, something which survives gaps in memory, and survives the slings and arrows of misfortune. Our understanding of our own histories, fragmentary as it is, is shot through with strangeness and pathos. So also is our reflection on the destiny of peoples. If historical events are to be seen under the category of agency it would seem relevant to bring into consideration the pushes and pulls, the factors of determination and aspiration that shape human decisions. The peculiarity of retrospection is akin to the peculiarity of historical awareness and both are girt about with that mysterious element—the sense of what is past. Modern man's alertness to personal crisis and catastrophe, the *Angst* of the twentieth century of which the existentialists have written, alerts him to the critical turning points in the affairs of societies and of nations. Now what the theist does is to extrapolate his experience of personal redemption to historical process. His belief that all things work together for good bears the proviso that this is so to those who love God. Are we to conclude that meaning in history discloses itself only to the eye of faith? We shall leave this question on one side and return to it later. For the time being we can note that Reinhold Niebuhr who wrote on the nature and destiny of man offers support of the analogy just presented when he said the following: "The whole history of man is thus comparable to his individual life."

Clues and stumbling-blocks—three models.

We turn next to the consideration of clues and stumbling-blocks. The major clue which stimulates reflection on history is the fact of change. Lucretius wrote:

"For time changes the nature of the whole world and all things must pass on from one condition to another, and nothing continues like to itself; and things quit their bounds; all things nature changes and compels to alter." In plotting the changes which occur in physical nature we search for uniformities; we discover the laws which enable us to predict and control phenomena. But since history is the record of human actions we take into account reasons as well as causes and search for directions of change. The laws which govern human behaviour cannot all be understood in terms of efficient causality. When Thucydides wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War* he said that history was intended to help "whoever might wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all probability, happen again in the same or similar way."[1] Geographical conditions, natural resources, their abundance or scarcity, are examples of material factors which enter into the shaping of historical events. But unless we are cast-iron determinists we would not attribute the course of history entirely to these factors. Historical knowledge draws on our knowledge of natural laws without seeing the individual event as a mere instantiation of a law. The complexity of historical events moreoever makes them susceptible of many interpretations. This is particularly true when we are assessing importance. Anyone who has at some time been called upon to assess the importance of the industrial revolution knows how manifold was its impact, indeed its meaning. The historian probes the roots of change, analyses its various elements, and indicates the effect of all this on subsequent events. He is concerned with all the dimensions of time, past, present and future. But to ask for the meaning of history is to ask for more than the meaning of any particular event. Do the changes recorded in history exhibit any overall pattern?

The ancient Greeks took their clue in answering this question from the visible order and pattern of the natural word, its rhythm of

1. History of the Peloponnesian War, I, 22.

growth, decay and recurrence. This model had the advantage of combining the recognition of change in time with regularity and direction. The uniqueness of historical events did not strike the men of antiquity. Classical dramas portrayed gods and heroes alike subject to the challenge of changing fortune. In a world where there is no escape from such challenges fortitude was the best response which man was capable of. History was to be endured. Paradoxically the message of myth amounted to the same thing. Triumph and defeat, fulfilment and destruction are alike part of the experience of man. The cyclical view of time whether in ancient Greece or India should not be taken as reflecting an acquiescence in nature's tyranny but as expressing a belief in man's participation in the primordial, the fact of struggle as primordial. The circle symbolized the historical in Greek thought and the wheel in oriental thought. It is only the modern European mind which finds the theme of eternal recurrence depressing. For example the Swiss dramatist, Max Frisch put into the mouth of the hero in his play *The Chinese Wall*, this question : "Is this what history means that man's mistakes keep repeating endlessly?" In the last scene Frisch has the stage prepared once more for the first act and the audience is told :

"The farce is going to start all over again."

But at its best the Greco-Roman view evinced faith in the foundationality of the past. That this involved giving due respect to the deeds of great men comes out clearly in Herodotus' insistence that the past must be recorded "in order that the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time" and "that great deeds may not lack renown." Karl Loewith characterizes this thesis in a perceptive way. I quote :

"The 'meaning' of recorded events is not explicit and does not transcend the single events but is implied in the stories themselves. What they mean is simply what they point out by having a point. Behind these obvious meanings there are also half-hidden meanings, occasionally revealed in significant words, gestures, signs and oracles. And when at certain moments the actual human deeds and events coincide with superhuman intimations, then a circle of meaning is

completed, wherein the beginning and the end of a story illuminate each other."[2]

We owe to the ancient world the concept of the historico-natural, a concept towards which we grope in our own centutry in the new science of ecology. The mutability of fortune was taken for granted. So, as Polybius put it, the lesson to be derived from history was "never to boast unduly of achievements". The Greco-Roman, therefore, familiar as he was with crisis and catastrophe, was free from the obligation to fit these into a Procrustean bed of Providential governance. He was equally free from the modern tendency to read into holocausts and horrors the message of meaninglessness.

If the clue in the ancient world was the rhythm of nature, the clue in the Christian era was the concept of salvation history, the sacred record of the creation, the fall of man, redemption and the final *parousia* that would mark the end of history. St. Augustine's philosophy of history centres on the meaning of human freedom and the unique historical event of the advent of Christ. Biblical linearism has set the model for a concept of irreversible time that was imbued with hope thanks to the one God who directs the destinies of men and nations in a meaningful direction. 'Meaningful' here denotes the same as purposiveness. The contrast between sacred and profane history was bridged by the concept of a providential power active in human history, a covenant which made meaningful the joint venture of God and man in redeeming nature.

The Judaeo-Christian view of the purposive character of human history as the arena of man's redemption has a special contribution to make regarding what had since time immemorial been looked on as the main stumbling—block to a teleological interpretation of either nature or history—the presence of evil and the fact of human suffering. This contribution is the belief in the meaningfulness of suffering. This in turn takes its clue from the Old Testament narratives concerning the suffering of God on account of man's sinfulness and the paradigmatic suffering of Christ on the Cross which is the culminative event in the New Testament. The implications for a theory of history are these. In addition to the sufferings caused by the follies of mankind

2. Karl Loewith, *Meaning in History*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 6-7.

there is another class of sufferings, the sacrificial sufferings undertaken in the course of the pursuit of justice and righteousness. The Christian world-view, as compared to the Judaic one which gave it birth, was universalistic in intention. Its gospel was open to both bond and free. The idea was that allegiance to a new form of society, a church of believers, would cut across the particular allegiance to separate states. The church as an ideal community should leaven the lump should transform society.

A work written by Orosius about 418 A.D. entitled *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans* shows an interesting reversal of the human tendency to glorify what has been. He writes:

"Everyone who sees mankind reflected through himself and in himself perceives that this world has been disciplined since the creation of man by alternating periods of good and bad times".[3]

Orosius, who was both a Roman and a Christian, writes very shrewdly:

"Let judgement be passed whether the days of Alexander should be praised on account of his valor in conquering the world or be accused because of the ruin he brought upon mankind. Many people will be found today who think the present good because they themselves have overcome obstacles and because they consider the miseries of others their own good fortune."[4] The Christian world-view was, and is, eschatological. To say this is to say that it is based on faith and hope.

The belief in progress which typifies the modern era is really a secularized eschatology with science as the oracle and man as the beneficent intervener in nature's everyday performances. As R.A. Knox puts it:[5] "Those who had lost the sense of religious certainty enrolled themselves under the banner of optimism." J.B. Bury wrote that "it was not till men felt independent of providence that they could organize a theory of progress".[6] Eventually the doctrine of

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3. Eng. tr. by Irving Woodworth Raymond, New York 1936 p. 33.
4. Op. cit pp. 139 ff.
5. *God and the Atom*, New York 1945, p. 59.
6. *The Idea of Progress*, New York 1932, pp. 22, 73.

progress itself assumed a providential garb, albeit in a rationalist framework. Progress was defined in terms of more and more reasonableness, freedom and happiness. The apostles of progress were avowedly this - worldly. They rejected the transcendent dimension which had given meaning to history in a more theistically inclined age. It would not be true to say, though, that thinkers like Proudhon were anti-metaphysical. The linearity of Augustine, Orosius, Otto of Freising, Joachim and Bossuet was still there. That is to say the notion of direction was retained. But the immanent dynamic principle was not the God of history but universal reason.

Progressivism took many forms. Not all Enlightenment thinkers thought in terms of inevitability. Kant, for example, thought in terms of qualified progress arising from man's "unsocial sociability." He came to the study of history because of the moral questions it seemed to raise. In an essay contributed to the periodical *Berlin Monthly*[7] entitled "Idea of a universal History from a Cosmopolitan point of view" he asks:

"What use is it to glorify and commend to view the splendour and wisdom of creation shown in the irrational kingdom of nature, if, on the great stage where the supreme wisdom manifests itself, that part which constitutes the final end of the whole natural process, namely human history, is to offer a standing objection to our adopting such an attitude?" Individual historical happenings seem to be unconnected and meaningless. Is there any point of view from which the "incoherent and lawless" seems to fall in line with an overriding purpose? Kant's answer is a strange blend of appeal to the Aristotelian concept of potentiality and his own transcendental approach. The various potentialities in man include his inclination to associate with others and at the same time a counter-propensity to isolate himself from his fellows. Man can neither do without his fellows nor get on with them. It is the very antagonisms of his life which awaken his powers and lead him in Kant's words to "take the first real steps from the state of barbarism to that of civilization". What Kant is saying is that those very things which make us despair of history are evidence of man's long climb away from his anti-social

7. *Werke*, Berlin Edition, VIII, 30.

potentialities. Initially man passes from the state of nature to a civil society. The further step to a peaceful society at the international level remains yet an ideal. So Kant concludes :

"The history of the human species as a whole may be regarded as the realization of a secret plan of Nature for bringing into existence a political constitution perfect both from the internal point of view and, so far as regards this purpose, from the external point of view also; such a constitution being the sole condition under which nature can fully develop all the capacities she has implanted in humanity".[8] In terms of Kant's critical philosophy the principle he is offering us here must be classified as heuristic. We are "endowing with meaning" as the phenomenologists would say. He does have the great merit of looking at history beyond the confines of national boundaries, of probing the link between our attitude to the past and our moral consciousness, and attempts to come to terms with the big stumbling-block of war. He is also realist enough to see that although there is a certain continuity about human affairs there is no necessary and straight forward progression towards a better state of affairs.

The philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who thought in terms of progress are in many ways closer to us than those who thought of history in cyclical terms or in terms of providential guidance—the two other models briefly discussed earlier. Some of the metaphysical underpinning, the belief in reason, for example, has not survived, without qualification, into the twentieth centuary. Faith in the potentiality for good of science and the expansion of knowledge as such plus a frank recognition of the hostile potentiality of rival nation states—these characterize the world-view of men of our own century no less than they characterized the outlook of the Enlightenment thinkers.

The French writers saw a definite link between the idea of progress and the perfectibility of human nature. Long before the advent of the environmentalism of the Marxists and the pragmatists, men like the Abbé de Saint Pierre saw new avenues to progress in the expanding world made possible by increased communications, commerce, and the sciences. What was possible would not of course necessarily come about. Disaster could be attributed to human

8. *Werke*, VIII, 27.

failure, and not to any intrinsically intractable factor in the nature of things. In other words failure was no cause for loss of belief in the meaningfulness of the course of history. The eighteenth century French thinkers like Turgot and Condorçet sharpened the distinction between nature and history but at the same time sought to extend to the study of society the objective methods used in the empirical sciences. Turgot does not look upon the history of men as subject to a single law of development, but gives due weight to the intricate interplay of human intention and unexpected outcome. To see even dimly into the meaning of history on such a view is to understand man himself, a task which is never complete. The notion of hidden historical processes which in writers like Adam Smith were associated with the hypothesis of the "invisible hand" emerged later as forces which were as blind as those of which Darwin spoke. The critics of historical inevitability in the twentieth century have protested not only against the identification of tendency and trend with desirability, still less with goodness, but have detected in the notion of historical forces something which cuts at the very root of the concept of a pluralistic society.

But to revert for the time being to the French thinkers of the Enlightenment, there is another facet of their work which enabled them to discover meaning in history—namely their analysis of successive phases of human society and their belief that changes were for the better. Condorçet is a good example of this approach. In common with men of his times he sees the leverage of changes in the advancement of knowledge rather than in the transition to new productive systems. He is unsympathetic to the mediaeval period, but in the modern period rates the invention of printing above the growth of commerce or the discovery of gunpowder. The periodization which Condorçet sketched in the form of ten stages would no longer be accepted today, but he was a pioneer in introducing the developmental concept which in the post-Darwinian era was the main tool of the "new" history. While episodic exposition lends itself to the micro-techniques of study in depth, the new history draws on anthropology and sociology and is more able to accommodate the categories of 'meaning' and 'purpose' in the philosophical sense.

The concept of historical laws as the vehicle of meaning was developed by Saint-Simon and even more by his pupil Auguste Comte.

Saint-Simon was ready to concede the meaningfulness of religion as a social phenomenon, but there was a big difference between conceding this and conceding that human affairs were shaped by divine purpose. The latter belief was quite incompatible with the anti-clericalist temper of the Encyclopedists and their successors. Auguste Comte, the positivist, aimed at reducing society and its various phenomena to a science with laws as determinable as those of the physical sciences. His goal was stated thus: "The purpose of our attempts—in as much as our search for causes, first or final, is vain—is to make an accurate discovery of those laws, and to reduce them to the smallest possible number." The plan then was Newtonian in design. In the eighteenth century tussle between mechanism and teleology Comte was firmly on the side of the mechanists. In terms of our theme he could claim to have a theory of the meaningfulness of history in that any historical event could be seen as the instantiation of a law, but any hint of a purpose that runs through the ages was explicitly excluded. His emphasis on the observation of phenomena was a good corrective to the abstractions of some of his contemporaries. His study of social dynamics influenced Mill, Durkheim and Spencer, and his faith that human relations can be understood and controlled had meliorist implications. These led to a concept of secular salvation that has proved to be one of the most dominant operative concepts of social policy in our own times. "Loewith points out an interesting inconsistency in Comte's reflections on history. He takes Christianity to task for claiming to mark the final and complete fulfilment of man's powers and yet himself takes the scientific stage to be final. The apocalyptic character of all secular theories of progress is not to be missed. To say that "the future is full of promise" is to speak the language of hope. Confidence in the future requires either a transcendent *eschaton* or a particularly stringent form of rationalism. But on the basis of rationalism secular futurism can at most think in terms of an indefinite advance with no goal in sight. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that the ideals of the French Revolution were a sufficient guide to the future makers of history. These ideals guided those who formulated blueprints of Utopian societies no doubt, but those who look back on nineteenth century history may well find the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

While on the subject of futurism it is worth noting that Comte thought that modern industry would "necessarily" lead to the abolition of wars, for he believed that the industrial spirit would replace the military spirit. He argued on these lines because in his own days he saw an association between the theological and the military power, where our own experience has led us to see an association between industry and militarism. Comte in fact did not successfully predict the subsequent development of western civilization. Furthermore it must be added that the application of scientific method to the study of history in the Comtian manner was based on too many simplifications.

Some brief mention of Marx's progressivism is needed next, for most contemporary historians at some time or other find Marx's insight into the economic determinants of social and political change a useful thread to follow in the labyrinth of history. Marx finds a meaningful developmental dialectic in the forces of production. This for him certainly provides an inner meaning of history throughout the ages, although as in the case of Comte there is no trace of purpose admitted. Marx finds the growth principle in the phenomenon of conflict and he does envisage a goal for historical process—the withering away of the state. If, however, changes in the mode of production are the lever of change one might imagine that further developments in technology could trigger off unpredictable changes even after the state has withered away. This is not the place to go into Marxist dialectics. More interesting for our theme is the Marxist implication that it is the workers who have become enlightened as to the nature of the class struggle who really understand the meaning of history. This understanding amounts to an insight into what has to be brought to birth—the new society where the expropriators will be expropriated. In the drama of history, Marx writes, unlike in the unconscious processes of nature, the actors are all endowed with consciousness. Marx believed furthermore that he had made the very process of history conscious. If this be so then the meaning of history is revealed in events in the present and to those occupied with present-day problems. At this particular point I believe Marx gave voice to a profound truth. How are we to understand the meaning of history from our present vantage point in time? It is with this question that I shall begin tomorrow's lecture.

Lecture II

History and the concept of possibility

Those who search for a meaning in history do so from the vantage-point of their own position in time. In his Introduction to one of the most important works on philosophy to appear in recent years, *Totality and Infinity* by *Emmanuel Lévinas*, John Wild says this:"... the judgement of history is made by survivors on the works of the dead who are no longer present to explain and defend them. " This is a sobering thought which in a sense points to the pretentiousness of the historians task. But is not the self-imposed task of the philosopher of history even more pretentious? We have briefly looked at three ways of discerning meaning in history, first the cyclical view which takes its clue from the rhythms of nature, secondly the Judaeo-Christian view according to which human history is illuminated by sacred history, and thirdly the progressivist view which like the second regards process as linear but finds in reason rather than Providence the guiding principle. Of these three only the second speaks not only of meaning but of purpose. I wish now to turn next to a controversial thinker who shifted from a cyclical view to a linear one and who in spite of the catacyclisms of our times affirmed the meaningfulness of the historic process. I refer to Arnold Toynbee.

Arnold Toynbee

The work of Arnold Toynbee has roused the ire of many professional historians, although the layman and the philosopher continue to find his views on the meaning of history highly suggestive. The reason forthis sharp difference of opinion can be put as follows. Most analytical philosophers of history set themselves the aim not of trying to assess the past, but to assess the ways in which historians describe the past. They are concerned with methodological and epistemic questions about presuppositions, modes of explanation and argument. Men like Toynbee believe that substantive questions about the meaning of historical process can be asked and that to ask them is no less important than to inquire into the relation between man and nature, an

inquiry whose philosophic respectability has been less in doubt. It may not be out of place, some few months after his death, to try and see the work of this fertile thinker of our own life-time in perspective. It is said that Toynbee began his *Study of History*, a massive work in ten volumes, inspired by seeing Bulgarian peasants wearing fox-skin caps like those described by Herodotus as the headgear of Xerxes' troops. He would no doubt have experienced a similar frisson if he had seen the wickerwork shields used by our police to protect themselves against stone-throwing by unruly crowds, for this device was consciously adopted by those in authority, taking their clue from the 'tortoise' of Roman times.

Toynbee set himself the question which all who take a speculative approach to history ask, that is, the question "Does history as a whole make sense?" The question resembles the philosophers' questions about ultimate reality. That is to say both the speculative philosopher of history and the speculative metaphysician face the challenge of the verificationist. The charge however, it seems to me, touches the former rather less than it does the latter. Why do I say this? Because the problem of verification faces the micro-historian (if I may call him such), or in the fashionable phrase, the historian who studies "in depth", no less than it does the Toynbee or the Teilhard who thinks in broad sweeps and paints his canvas in great washes of colour. This is of course only a 'tu quoque' type of strategy and I do not wish to labour the point, nor to defend Toynbee's mode of historicizing. But it is significant that Toynbee's own thought had already been through the sociologists' mill before he turned to metaphysics. The micro-view, we may conclude, he had found wanting. He does not confine history to a store-house of materials or "sources" on which to exercise technical skills. It is noteworthy also that, like Herder, Toynbee looked at historical processes in terms drawn from biology. In this he is one with a philosopher like H.W.B. Joseph, a fellow classicist, who also found in the basic concepts of the biological sciences a far more fruitful source of analogies for the metaphysician than the somewhat played-out concepts of physics and chemistry. Where are we to search for 'meaning' if not in the life-sciences, for it is here that we find the category of purpose illuminating the density of circumstance and the slow movement of events from the simple to the

complex. No less a person than Jonas Salk, founder of the Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, California has said the following:

"Living systems require different considerations than nonliving systems; the idea of purpose in living systems is not just relevant; it is essential."[1]

Toynbee's opus has been described by Christopher Dawson as "a relativist phenomenology of equivalent cultures".[2] Like Spengler Toynbee was fascinated by the vicissitudes which beset civilizations, although he did not share Spengler's preoccupation with race and environment as determinants of the Gibbonian theme of their decline and fall. Writing at a time when, thanks to the influence of Marxism, historians were increasingly interested in the socio-economic, Toynbee insisted on the power of ideas, the fertilising influence of dynamic minorities and creative individuals. His voice tended to resound in the wilderness. Although he conceived the affairs of men in broad patterns he was singular in being able to discern a common structure in different societies without condemning them all deterministically to a common fate. This he could do thanks to his sensitivity to that rather unfashionable concept—'ethos'. Those who see something sinister in the doctrine of historical inevitability have no real occasion for dispute with Toynbee. Another facet of Toynbee's thought which incurred the odium of some scholars is his perception of the essential contingency of nation-states. If his speculative temper makes him akin to Hegel in some respects he is far indeed from Hegel's semi-divinization of the state, seeing in the state only a cultural continuance serving to establish order and uniformity and which is by no means an end in itself. At a time when history was still the history of nation-states, Toynbee's vast canvas of world history seemed to the historian-in-depth a new kind of scholarly barbarism. But it is precisely this vast canvas which inspires respect.

Volumes 7 to 10 of Toynbee's *Study* have been characterized by their shift from a cyclical view of histery to a linear one. The western world did not take kindly to his suggestion that the new fertilising

1. *Man Unfolding*, Allied Publishers, 1972, p. 48.

2. "Toynbee's Odyssey of the West, *Commonweal* 27-10-54, p. 62.

agencies of the future might come from the east. His insistence on religion as experience represented a breakaway from the traditional understanding of religion in terms either of institutions or theologies or both. He was akin to the psychologists in seeing religion as arising out of deep-seated human needs, and he was an iconolast in detecting how soon the so-called higher faiths become tools of power-structures and succumb to political pressures. Although Toynbee's philosophy of history springs from a Christian base, his final position could be described as post-Christian. He believed that man's diverse psychical needs could not be met by any one faith and that the "psychic diapason" encompassed diverse themes. He wrote:

"The diverse higher religions must school themselves to playing limited parts, and must school themselves to playing these parts in harmony, in order, between them, to fulfil their common purpose of enabling every human being of every psychological type to enter into communion with God, the Ultimate Reality."[3]

The Augustinian motif, that "we are restless till we find ourselves in Thee", breaks through Toynbee's oecumenism. But what he offers is not a theology of history in the sense in which a Reinhold Niebuhr or a Hans Urs von Balthasar offers one. Theology of history, perhaps the most traditional way of discerning one enduring meaning and purpose in history, concerns itself with the following basic themes: eschatology, dogma, providence, freedom, transcendence and immanence, and especially the role of Church. Toynbee's work is free of these biases and his work is therefore all the more accessible to those whose cultural affiliations lie outside the Christian belief-system.

In recent years much is made of a relatively new branch of history, namely contemporary history. This is, I think, witness to the immensely complicated web of current events and the speed of change. This coupled with the vast accumulation of records provided by the various media makes the work of the contemporary historian an on-the-spot job. The present-day historian, that is to say, is much more concerned with the present than his predecessors were. This comes about not only through the need to rewrite history in the post-colonial

3. *A Study of History*, 7 B, p. 734.

era, but to disentangle the many-structured character of actuality, that is to say, what is currently in process. Such a task naturally carries with it a vision of future directions. For the historian to have something to say about the future, I am suggesting, enters as a matter of course into the study of contemporary history. Much of Toynbee's apparent propheticism, therefore, is not as outlandish as it at first sight appears. His awareness of disaster is no less than that of any contemporary Jeremiah, but his sense of possibility - a concept to which I shall return - enables him to discover the path to a redemption which both Christian and non-Christian can find meaningful. The objectivists in a debate which is both loud and long, claim to be concerned with history for its own sake. The ordinary man however, can claim an interest in history which will always be rather less than this in terms of objectivity since no man can be entirely objective about what has made him what he is. To think historically is not only to understand what was but to understand whence we have come. Toynbee does not put forward a theory of universal law which would make predictability possible. To this extent he escapes Popper's diatribe against historicism. He is rather on the side of Meinecke's third mode of causality, the spiritual-moral which affirms the role of creativity in history. This is what Meinecke says:

" ...Beyond the contingent operation of mechanistic causality the spontaneous acts of men may ..intervene to interpret, divert, intensify, or weaken the morphology of events and so impart to history that complexity and singularity which makes a mockery of all attempts to explain it by invariable laws ".[4]

Meinecke, the great German historian of the Romantic movement, found the vital treasures of the past in spheres beyond the avowedly historical, in language, legend, folk-songs, laws, customs and the arts. Recent discussions among Indian historians about the possible historical basis for epics and myths are witness to a similar concern. Any people with an ancient history tend to seek a meaning in the annals of time which goes beyond the boundaries of recorded history, a fringe lit up by myth and legend. Only a philosophy of history sensitive to the resonance of meaning in literature and art, in archeo-

4. *The Varieties of History*, Fritz Stern(ed) (New York: Meridian, 1959). " Historicism and its Problems " by Friedrich Meinecke, p. 269.

logy as well as in texts can attempt to read the ciphers which give a clue to the meaning of history, because it is these same ciphers which throw light on our present condition. I shall not develop this point further, interesting though it may be. I wish next to reflect further on the role of the spiritual - moral or creative element in history stressed by both Meinecke and Toynbee and to do this by turning our attention to Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on history.

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of history

Gandhiji's thesis was a startling one: "History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul. History, then, is a record of an interruption in the course of nature." This striking passage occurs in *Hind Swaraj* written at a time when Gandhiji's faith in the so-called civilised world had received some rude shocks. He believed that the same power that sustained nature sustained history too, a belief that whilst everything around him "is ever changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that changes a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and re-creates." He believed that this power was benevolent, for as he says "I can see that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is life, Truth, Light. He is love. He is the Supreme Good."[5]

He said again and again that the sum total of the energy of mankind is "not to bring us down but to lift us up." Where others look at the life of men in societies and see in this life the gradual spread of the light of knowledge and the scientific ordering of affairs Gandhi's analysis was quite different. He writes: "If we turn our eyes to the time of which history has any record down to our own time, we shall find that man has been steadily progressing towards *ahimsa.*"[6] The main arguments given for this view are deceptively simple. He writes: "I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction and therefore there must be a higher law than that of destruction." Secondly if this is the higher law, we should work it out in daily life. And thirdly, in his own words "That this law of

5. *Young India*, 11-10-28.

6. *Harijan*, 11-8-40.

love has answered as the law of destruction has never done."[7] How is all this to be reconciled with history as the record of the follies of mankind?

By 1920 Gandhiji appears to have been clear in his mind that there was a distinction between the meaning and purpose of history as distinct from the flux of the historical process. He wrote the following: "It is my pet theory that our Hindu ancestors solved the question for us by ignoring history as it is understood today and by building on slight events their philosophical structure. Such is the *Mahabharata*. I look to Gibbon and Motley as inferior editions of the *Mahabharata*. The substance of these stories is: names and forms matter little. They come and go. That which is permanent, and therefore, necessary, eludes the historian of events. Truth transcends history. "From this we may infer that Gandhi thought that the meaning of history is often hidden in legend, for legendary heroes embody the values cherished by man. He also saw in the unrecorded peaceful pursuits of ordinary men evidence of the meaning of history.

Gandhi was interested in the pilgrimage of men and so, like Pasternak, he could have said "there are no nations, but only persons". The meaning of history was then to be found not in the chronicle of battles and dynasties, of which Indian history especially is full, but in the drama in the hearts of men. He used both cyclical and linear language at different times. If we put these accounts together we have the resultant concept of history as a spiral movement inspired by the power of spirit over matter within the framework of *Karma*. That there is no inevitability about this process is clear from this passage:

"Life is not one straight road. There are so many complexities in it. It is not like a train which, once started, keeps on running."[8]

Or again, "It is more a record of wonderful revolutions than of so-called ordered progress."[9]

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7. *Young India*, 1-10-31.
8. Shukla, *Conversations of Gandhi*, Sept. 1933, p. 9.
9. *Young India*, Feb. 1922.

As a national leader Gandhi had no special love of the past. When he said that "the future history is the history of man" he was thinking of the way in which a self-determined free people would be able to determine their own destiny. This sentiment is paralleled by Pieter Geyl, the distinguished historian, when he writes:

"We need not let ourselves be shaken in our confidence that the future lies open before us, that in the midst of misery and confusion such as have so frequently occurred in history, we still dispose of forces no less valuable than those by which earlier generations have managed to struggle through their troubles."[10]

Gandhi was thinking and working in the context of what was then present, and the present was, in his own words, "non-violence in action pervading the whole land." Addressing those who could not go the whole way with him in 1937 he said, "History is a record of perpetual wars, but we are trying to make new history, and I say this as I represent the national mind so far as non-violence is concerned." To adopt non-violence amounted to making history in a double sense, acting in the present in a new and pioneering way, and laying down new goals of further non-violent activity, for the future. There is a further implication in Gandhi's thinking on this theme. He believed that through non-violent means ordinary men and women would be able to make their name in history; that they had in fact done so, and would do so in the future. This is all of a piece with Gandhi's disagreement with those who understand by history mainly political history. A subject people can have little or no part to play in political history. But, as Gandhi showed, there is another way in which they can give meaning to events, by using their collective non-violent strength to resist injustice. In the *Satyagraha* movements we find those elements to which Meinecke referred, "the spontaneous acts of men "which may "intervene to interpret, divert, intensify, or weaken the morphology of events..." To say that Gandhi believed that man would be the agent of history in the future is to remember his faith in democracy. This however must be seen in the context of a particular value in which he profoundly believed, the value of non-

10. *Debates with Historians,* p. 129.

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violence and his belief in what he called the law of life, the power of love, or God. Man's successive attempts to realise this law, that is, to translate it in terms of institutions and relationships between men, stumbling as these attempts are, were steps on the pilgrim way to Ram Rajya or the Kingdom of God on earth. Such a view cannot be called a Utopian view of history, for Gandhi worked out his ideal of non-violent action with institutions and men as they were. Non-violence was not postponed to a far-off anticipated human condition in the future. Furthermore set-backs were not attributed to the failure of the ideal but to human failure to put it into practice. The clue is man's own capacity for non-violent heroism, and the stumbling-block is those powers in man which hold back his spiritual progress, factors like selfishness, fear and possessiveness. This brief excursion into Gandhi's thought perhaps shows and in a somewhat unexpected manner and in a way distinctively different from western writers on the subject that Gandhi did believe in an " inner meaning of history as disclosing the one increasing purpose that runs through the ages ". His conception of history moreover draws on the three models we looked at earlier and yet amounts to a quite new and original theory. It is time however to pay more attention to three concepts to be found utilised in a full measure in Gandhi's thinking and around which I hope to be able to weave my own thoughts about our theme. These concepts are those of the future, peace, and possibility.

Some tentative conclusions

I have mentioned from time to time the dichotomy of clues and stumbling-blocks. It is not difficult to find clues which encourage a belief in the meaning of history. Such clues can be found in the lives of great men, in acts of heroism, in path-breaking discoveries, and in works of art through which a transcendent order seems to break through in great shafts of light. But the fact of war, of man's inhumanity to man, seems to be the biggest stumbling-block of all. We look at history with the eyes of those who have survived the holocaust, and survived it through no merit of our own. Writing in a book with a very significant title, *Why don't we learn from history*, B. H. Liddell Hart, the distinguished military historian, said the following :

"The only hope for humanity now, is that my particular field of study, warfare, will become purely a subject of antiquarian interest. For with the advent of atomic weapons we have come either to the last page of war, at any rate on the major international scale we have known in the past, or to the last page of history.[11] He suggests that the meaning of history for us lies in what is to be avoided. Almost in a Gandhian way he holds that "......the germs of war lie within ourselves, not in economics, politics or religion as such",[12] but especially in the factors of "possessiveness, competitiveness, vanity and pugnacity." Even Emmanuel Levinas whose message is otherwise one of hope confesses, "Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war ?" Are we to conclude from a study of a history that, as in ancient times, there will always be wars and rumours of wars and that this is the central meaning that history has - the theme of Cain and Abel, of perpetual conflict? Such a meaning would certainly conflict with any concept of purpose other than the putative purpose of a "malin genie" or malignant deity. There were periods in history and cultures which entertained such a belief with all seriousness.

The study of history by those who have sought to make of it a scientific discipline has tended to result in a judgment that "things could not have been otherwise." This is found in an extreme form by those who speak of laws of history on an analogy with laws of nature. While the study of historical minutiae which gives rise to such a view has added depth to the subject it has often had the less desirable outcome of making us overlook the genuine turning points when things could have been otherwise, For example, I believe it is still not an altogether fruitless exercise for a student of modern Indian history to ask himself what might have been the latest point in time during the negotiations between the concerned parties when the partition of India could have been avoided. If there is any meaning in history at all - and I am on the side of those who do not rule out the question as a hopelessly unphilosophical or unhistorical one - I believe

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11. Pub. in 1971. Quotation from p. 22.

12. p. 58.

it is tied up with the concept of the possible, that is with our understanding of what might have been in our conspectus of the past, and our pre-visaging of what can be in the present and the future. For history would have no meaning unless man had a measure of free will. But then, it might be asked, this would accommodate meaning, but would it accommodate purpose? It would accommodate the finite purposes of men in different periods of history especially if our concern is less with political than with social and economic history as is the tendeney these days. The famous Dutch historian Huizinga proclaimed that "Historical thinking is always teleological." No doubt the archaeologist or the student of foreign policy employs the teleological concept. But to ask for an over-all purpose is to ask for something rather different. It involves extending the use of a concept operative in sacred history to profane history, and thus amounts to conflating the two. It is precisely this conflation which modern man finds it difficult to accept. Pascal evinced modern man's sense of loneliness amidst the vast spaces opened up by physics and astronomy. Modern man feels no less dismayed by the thought of vast stretches of time in which human misery seems to be a constant factor. Burckhardt's *Reflections on History* reveal this temper of mind most clearly, and he was writing in the last century, not this. But he believed that "the new, the great, and the liberating" would come about in our own century "when times of pauperization and simplification" would turn men away from the pursuit of power and wealth. He was prophetic in this respect. The problem is that the question of an over-all purpose that runs through the ages becomes meaningful only in the context of belief in a noumenal order which, although operative in this life, takes the believer beyond these limits. Such a belief has its root in the possibility of a personal salvation for such individual human being through whose agency God's ways will be made known. This is to say that God's purpose for the world is linked to his purpose for each human being.

Is there any other way in which an eschatological content can be imparted to historical process in our secular generation? One way lies in a metaphysical viewpoint, which thinks of Being as in a sense overflowing history. This suggests that Being is glimpsed in history but is not coincident with it. What kind of evidence would support

such a viewpoint? One thing surely would be the way human activities, some at least, strive towards the avoidance of war. This is one of the most hopeful signs in our contemporary history; one of its leading 'meanings'. If we take seriously Kant's profound dictum that "ought implies can" the implication, after spelling out some relevant intermediate propositions is that man can avoid war. Again may I refer to Levinas - to his pregnant saying that "Of peace there can be only an eschatology."[13] If experience appears to conflict with the eschatology of peace, this is, Gandhi would say, because we have yet to live up to the ideal of non-violence, or as Levinas expresses it, infinity overflows the thought that thinks it. In Husserlian terms the horizon is unfulfilled, or rather, yet-to-be-fulfilled potency. And so the many meanings along the way cumulatively lead us to this eschatology of peace. If Being is enacted in the relation between men and the relation between men is what gives meaning to life then history is internal to Being.

The twentieth century finds man in a new chapter of evolutionary history, for man can himself intervene in the evolutionary process. If this is so, the future needs to be seen in terms of possibility rather than of probability. The significant mutations taking place today are taking place in human consciousness. The possibilities are, at the macro-level, the possibility of a genuine world-history, and at the micro-level, the possibility of greater understanding and love between men. We have perhaps for the first time in history the great advantage of a greater knowledge of nature and the potencies within man himself. This gives ground for hope in a "realized eschatology", in C.H. Dodd's phrase, in our own time.

To speak of the infinite possibilities for good that pervade the relations between finite men is to speak a language which is not overtly teleological but which is in consonance with the belief of those who in more traditional terms saw the horizons of human affairs in an all-encompassing context. They thought of human history as part of the on-going story of man's redemption. Our modern consciousness sees much of this redemption as man's own responsibility, especially the responsibility of man for his own fellowmen. The power to undertake this human work of service and redemption can still be seen as deriving from a source transcendent to man and of which all human strivings towards a better world provide the strongest evidence.

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13. *Totality and Infinity*, p. 24. Dusquesne Studies, Nijhoff (Eng. trans. 1969.)